# Crip Killjoy

## Links

### Legal Ontology

#### Legal structures are predicated on a negative ontology of disability constructed around a lack. The very foundation of Western jurisprudence requires the subjection of debility in order to perfect ability – commodifying subjects into units of use-value while enacting psychic violence on those who strive for an ideal they by definition can never achieve.

Fiona Kumari Campbell, 2005

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With respect to disability, it would seem that such “legal actions” give rise to a false or distorted ontology, which is formulated on the basis of biomedical realism, and in whose terms disability is construed as a lack or negative valence. The “action” in this case is the suggestion that a negative ontology of disability coupled with a biomedical orientation toward disability prescriptions and evaluative rankings is necessary (i.e., a prerequisite) for the efficient administrative management and legal delimitation of “disability.” A poignant example of the continuing recitation of this kind of legal action of disability can be found in the introduction to a special journal issue guest-edited by Melinda Jones and Lee Ann Basser Marks (2000). According to these authors, most people with disabilities would share the view that being disabled is not a desirable state to be in, and even agree that disability should, where possible, be prevented. However, the suggestion that this carries negative implications about the entitlement to rights, or the values, respect and dignity of people with disabilities, should be resisted. While it may seem paradoxical, it is essential to meet the challenge of truly valuing those who are disabled at the same time as taking action to prevent or limit disability. (2000, 2; emphasis added) The pursuit of legal liberal rights discourse that Jones and Basser Marks encourage is deployed within the context of a negative ontological framework of disability and an assumed permissibility to performatively enact injurious speech. Insofar as Jones and Basser Marks ground their arguments in this context on an a priori assumption that disability is not to be countenanced, they bear testimony to the pervasive and normalizing effects of such negative formulations as key to the maintenance of ableist rationalities; in addition, these authors reveal the recuperative and totalizing tendencies and tensions in the flawed logic of ableist liberalism (see Foucault 1980a, 98). This logic allows the rhetoric of rights to “have it both ways,” that is, to simultaneously hold out the promise of equalization and to reinscribe negative ontologies of disability that continually produce and effect subordination. The very inclusiveness of the neoliberal conception of “citizenship” hinges upon governing disability according to an ethics of normalization and minimization. The individual of Western neoliberalism is an increasingly commodified entity. Within neoliberal societies, individuals are increasingly packaged and marketed (like inanimate objects) in terms of their respective “use-values” that become a measure of their respective worth. 10 Recent technological “advancements” hold out the possibilities of “elevating” the bodies (and minds) of individuals designated as disabled to the level of “nearly able.” Thus, we could argue that “enhancing” and “perfecting” technologies are really means with which to assimilate by way of morphing ableism. 11 A technological dynamic of morphing creates the illusion (that is, an appearance) that the “disabled” body transmogri‹es into the “normal” body, effecting a corporeal recomposition and re-formation of subjectivity. Though this sort of fantastic reimaging occurs at an ontological level, the violence of some technological applications is profoundly direct and immediate. Robert Carver writes: Footbinding was a method to attract a good husband and secure a happier life. At the speech and hearing clinic, I was trained to bind the mind of my daughter. Like the twisting of feet into lotus hooks, I was encouraged to force her deaf mind into a hearing shape. I must withhold recognition of her most eloquent gestures until she makes a sound, any sound. I must force her to wear hearing aids no matter how she struggles against them. The shape of a hearing mind is so much more attractive. (1990, n.p.) In fact, an inducement to cooperate with treatments, surgery, and ‹ttings may not be necessary due to the enduring hegemonic compulsion toward ableist normativity. Individuals with disabilities (and, in many cases, their families) develop a sense of responsibilization,a sense of correct ethical conduct, that is, a “regime of truth” about what it is to be a “proper” citizen. These judgments about the “correct” way in which to conduct oneself are often shaped by (or, despite) one’s awareness of the ontological, epistemological, and political effects of resistance or transgression against such prescriptions (cf. Foucault 1988, 1997). In this regard, let us brie›y consider a juridical move made within the U.S. context, but which could easily be replicated in the Australian context in which I am writing, namely, the introduction of the legal category of voluntary/elective/chosen disability.

### Medicalized Prisons

#### The prison industrial complex is sustained by the psychiatric management of deviant bodies – the mentally ill, physically disabled, and disposable. Analysis focused on merely racialized or gender-based violence obfuscates the ideological neoliberal ordering of the penal system around the signifier of “madness” and the medicalization of difference.

Michael Rembis, 2014

“The New Asylums: Madness and Mass Incarceration in the Neoliberal Era” in “Disability Incarcerated Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada”

In a revealing article in the December 2010 issue of the Journal of American History, historian Heather Ann Thompson argues that “focusing new historical attention . . . on the advent of mass incarceration after the 1960s, helps us understand some of the most dramatic political, economic, and social transformations of the postwar period” (734). After reading Thompson’s account, there is little doubt that this is indeed the case. Yet in an otherwise comprehensive and incisive analysis of the rise of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex in the postwar United States, Thompson unsurprisingly fails to account for perhaps one of the most critical social transformations in this process; the so-called deinstitutionalization of well over 550,000 Americans who had been living incarcerated lives in mental hospitals (Palermo, Smith, and Liska 1991; Penrose 1939).1 Recent researchers in various fields have referred to what they call the criminalization of mental illness (Slate and Johnson 2008). Yet those historians who engage in a critical assessment of mass incarceration in the late twentieth century do not consider the important relationships among the rise of the prison industrial complex and the increasing psychiatrization of both socially “deviant” behavior and incarcerated populations, as well as the psychic trauma associated with incarceration. In 2007, the Council of State Governments declared that, “The three largest inpatient psychiatric facilities in the country are jails, with the Los Angeles County Jail, Rikers Island Jail in New York City, and the Cook County Jail in Chicago each individually housing more persons with mental illnesses than any psychiatric institution in the United States.” (Slate and Johnson 2008, 59) In this chapter, I engage in a critical assessment of the relevant literature in an effort to outline the growing connections among “deinstitutionalization” and the rise of mass incarceration from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century. In the process, I point toward the critical importance of including this analysis in the larger history of mass incarceration in the postwar United States and make an argument for the centrality of disability studies (or mad studies) in any examination of United States history. The omission of madness and mad prisoners from the recent historical record is pervasive in the literature on incarceration. For decades, activists and academics like Angela Davis (2005) have done the vital work of helping us “think about the possibility that punishment may be a consequence of other forces and not an inevitable consequence of the commission of crime” (40–41). Yet many scholars and activists who engage in a critical assessment of the rise of the prison industrial complex do not interrogate (in any systematic way) the links between madness and incarceration (Alexander 2010; Thompson 2010). Instead, they focus on race and poverty. Davis, for example, argues that, “Regardless of who has or has not committed crimes, punishment, in brief, can be seen more as a consequence of racialized surveillance . . . Those communities that are subject to police surveillance are much more likely to produce more bodies for the punishment industry.” According to Davis (2005), incarceration has become a powerful means of “disappearing . . . dispensable populations from society . . . in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems they represent.” She contends that “imprisonment is the punitive solution to a whole range of social problems that are not being addressed by those social institutions that might help people lead better, more satisfying lives” (40–41). Davis is certainly (and rightly) not alone in her focus on the social, cultural, and economic forces that produce the surveillance and incarceration of racialized bodies, which is extremely important. The vast majority of incarcerated Americans are poor men, women, and children of color. While recognizing the essential work that has been done in this area, I would like to propose that race alone is inadequate to explain the rise of mass incarceration in the United States since the 1960s. We cannot begin to grasp the complex and powerful role that mass incarceration has taken on in the era of neoliberalism without making serious consideration of the extent to which our modern lives have become embedded within and dependent on a medicalized, psychiatrized, and ultimately punitive, discourse of madness (Foucault and Senellart 2008; Harvey 2005; Phillips-Fein 2009).

### Neoliberal Labor

#### Structures of labor are ableist and gendered – neoliberalism mandates an affectively infused labor – “the “smiling” Walmart greeter and the “playing nice” depressed worker.

Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, 2014

“Cripistemologies: Introduction”, Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, Volume 8, Issue 2, (Article) Pg 131-132

Epistemology of the Closet has been widely influential in multiple critical fields, even if some of these bold opening claims are debatable.6 As we open these special issues of JLCDS on cripistemologies, we might, however, cede Sedgwick the twentieth century, and suggest, provocatively and playfully, that thought and knowledge in twenty-first-century Western culture as a whole is structured—indeed, fractured—by an endemic crisis of ability and disability. And we would be willing to make at least a partial case that this crisis is indicatively female. Even more to the point, an understanding of virtually any aspect of contemporary Western culture must be not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of able-bodied/disabled definition and the appropriate place to begin is the relatively decentered position of crip, anti-ableist theory. “Indicatively female” describes the cripistemological crisis we are theorizing here for several reasons: the changing face of global health crises such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the prominent voices of feminist theorists in debates about disability knowledge (debates we trace in the section that follows), and the disproportionately female low-wage labor force generated by the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy over the past four decades. In and out of the academy, more women than men compose a casualized workforce, providing a cheap labor supply. Although roughly the same number of university-level courses are being taught in Europe and North America as in, say, 1975, these positions are now typically contingent and insecure, and more women than men bear the burden of their mind-numbing, backbreaking workload. We write this introduction during a standoff over health in the United States, with the government currently shutdown over conservative efforts to stop the Affordable Care Act. The ACA (however weakly) attempts to distribute health care in the US to a wider swath of people. When such care is not distributed more publicly, it is essentially privatized, and again women take up much of this labor. As some universities respond to new federal health-care initiatives by limiting adjuncts to two courses per semester rather than paying the fringe costs that would be required by the ACA if they continued to allow “part-timers” to teach three, four, or five courses per semester, this population of workers is super-exploited.7 The crisis is “indicatively female” because it points toward disabling structural positions largely occupied by women, an observation we make not as an ableist lament about more disability in the world, but to comment on the gendered dimension of able-bodied privilege. The shifting economy under neoliberalism is also about service and exhausting affective labor (smile! take care of me!)—labor that continues to be gendered female. Crip theory in this crisis should ask who cares: literally, who performs service work, but also, more coarsely, who gives a shit about you and your need to be smiled at? Which bodies/minds/impairments in this moment of crisis will count as authentically and publicly disabled? Which will not? How will disability and impairment be measured? Thinking about all of this in the twenty-first century requires attending to many topics of conversation from that legendary weekend in Spartanburg: movements in search of theories; mad turns; illegible disabilities; dysregulated emotions; the state’s power to produce, contain, deny, or (mis)recognize impairment; disability beyond or across borders.

### Freedom

#### Freedom is a tool of liberalism to “civilize” populations in order to “advance” – that limits the category of human and excludes those rendered as lacking debility.

Fiona Kumari Campbell, 2005

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Within contemporary Western, neoliberal societies, freedom is held to be an inalienable and inherent right of the atomistic individual citizen. Indeed, the ethosof freedom is a foundation of the politics of our present, a mark and effect of justice and the other virtues of practiced democracy—that is, a measure of a society’s true worth, of the degree to which it is “civilized,” and the extent to which it is “advanced.” People who live in Western neoliberal democracies are seduced into freedom, the utopic dream that holds within itself a promise, that is, the vision of an alternative way of living. For disability activists, in particular, and for many of the other folk who live on the underside of liberalism, the ethosof freedom has performed as a source of emancipation that contains a promise to address “social injury.” As Wendy Brown (1995, 7) **reminds us, however, there is a paradox inherent to freedom: the incitement of freedom requires the very structures of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose**. In recent times, **the practices of freedom have been molded and codi‹ed into the apparatus of the welfare state, citizenship, and legal personality. In the terms of this apparatus, freedom is represented as autonomy,where this ideal encompasses the drive toward potential maximization, which invokes the performance of a choosing, desiring, and consuming subject** (cf. Foucault 1997). Furthermore, **the subject of the neoliberal welfare state is assumed to be an independent center of self-consciousness, who holds autonomy to be intrinsically valuable**. In the words of C. B. Macpherson (1964), **neoliberalism’s normative citizen is a nominal “possessive individual.” The nominal individual is free in as much as he [sic] is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essenceis freedom from dependence on the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession. . . . Society consists of relations of exchangebetween proprietors**.(Macpherson 1964, 3; emphasis added)

## Impact

### Liberal Disqualification

#### Propagation of violence is demarcated along lines of disqualification – the rendering of certain aesthetic characteristics as inferior and incapable of progress. These underpinnings of socially constructed disability is the master signifier that enables socially-constructed characteristics to justify disposability.

Tobin Siebers, 2009

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Oppression is the systematic victimization of one group by another. It is a form of intergroup violence. That oppression involves “groups,” and not “individuals,” means that it concerns identities, and this means, furthermore, that oppression always focuses on how the body appears, both on how it appears as a public and physical presence and on its specific and various appearances**. Oppression is justified** most often **by the attribution of natural inferiority—what some call “in-built” or “biological” inferiority.** Natural inferiority is **always somatic, focusing on the mental and physical features of the group, and it** figures as disability**.** The prototype of biological inferiority is disability. The representation of inferiority always comes back to the appearance of the body and the way the body makes other bodies feel. This is why the study of oppression requires an understanding of aesthetics—not only because oppression uses aesthetic judgments for its violence but also because the signposts of how oppression works are visible in the history of art, where aesthetic judgments about the creation and appreciation of bodies are openly discussed. One additional thought must be noted before I treat some analytic examples from the historical record. First, despite my statement that disability now serves as the master trope of human disqualification, it is not a matter of reducing other minority identities to disability identity. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the work done by disability in oppressive systems. In disability oppression, the physical and mental properties of the body are socially constructed as disqualifying defects, but this specific type of social construction happens to be integral at the present moment to the symbolic requirements of oppression in general. In every oppressive system of our day, I want to claim, the oppressed identity is represented in some way as disabled, and although it is hard to understand, the same process obtains when disability is the oppressed identity. “Racism” disqualifies on the basis of race, providing justification for the inferiority of certain skin colors, bloodlines, and physical features. “Sexism” disqualifies on the basis of sex/gender as a direct representation of mental and physical inferiority. “Classism” disqualifies on the basis of family lineage and socioeconomic power as proof of inferior genealogical status. “Ableism” disqualifies on the basis of mental and physical differences, first selecting and then stigmatizing them as disabilities. The oppressive system occults in each case the fact that the disqualified identity is socially constructed, a mere convention, representing signs of incompetence, weakness, or inferiority as undeniable facts of nature. As racism, sexism, and classism fall away slowly as justifications for human inferiority—and the critiques of these prejudices prove powerful examples of how to fight oppression—the prejudice against disability remains in full force, providing seemingly credible reasons for the belief in human inferiority and the oppressive systems built upon it. This usage will continue, I expect, until we reach a historical moment when we know as much about the social construction of disability as we now know about the social construction of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Disability represents at this moment in time the final frontier of justifiable human inferiority.

## Alternatives

### Crip Killjoy

#### Vote negative to embrace the Crip Killjoy - a refusal to play according to able-bodied logic. Instead, we embrace the wild extravagancy within the instability of the disabled – a crip willingness to release cruelly optimistic fantasies in favor of the reality of crip-life. Killing joy operates as both an internal personal catharsis and an external deployable strategy – deconstructing cultural institutions while carving spaces of possibility which resist forces of self-deprivation.

Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, 2014

“Cripistemologies: Introduction”, Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, Volume 8, Issue 2, (Article) Pg 135-137.

In “Prognosis Time,” Puar describes an interdependent relationship between the neoliberal consumer subject who “assumes the right not to be injured” by products made by “other bodies” who are selected for this work “because they are deemed available for injury,” “expendable” bodies, “bodies whose debilitation is required in order to sustain capitalist narratives of progress” (169). We want to add to this analysis of differential availability for injury by widening the category of “expendable bodies” or “bodies whose debilitation is required” by larger economic forces to make room for many more of us than might at first appear to belong there. Cripistemology further unwinds the spring between debility and capacity, not only by recognizing the ways one population’s capacity depends on the debility of others, but also by recognizing the ways capacity depends on debility within a single individual’s body or life (a recognition that remains, however unstably, indebted to sitpoint theory). For example, I (Lisa) have limited my willingness to travel over the past year, after many years of traveling to visit family or give lectures on other campuses, and constantly aggravating my chronic back pain. Now that I am less willing to travel, my family perceives my physical situation as having gotten worse, but my physical situation has actually stayed the same: it varies. Scolios is related disability is episodic, not linear, a matter of intensities, sensations, and situations, not illness and cure. Limiting my travel resulted not from worsening symptoms but from changing perceptions of personal responsibility to engage capacity in the service of obligatory family time and holiday ritual (smile!), or in my role as diversity worker in the neoliberal university and aspiring guest lecturer in the academy at large, when that capacity risks prolonged physical pain and debility. Driving or flying long distances hurts. It also means risking a recurrence of incapacitating back problems comprised of muscle spasms, mobility impairment, slowed productivity, and other costs of rehabilitation. If it seems, at times, as if it’s always something—if not back pain, then dizziness, nausea, anxiety dreams, eye infections, inflamed ligaments in the arches of my feet—those somethings arrive with less frequency and less disabling force when I slow down, redefine “able,” and turn down the invitation to speak or visit. I am not unable to travel; I am frequently unwilling. The inter-implications of capacity and debility have led me to this place of crip willfulness, which sounds like a mean place of stubborn resistance, but feels like a calm relinquishing of fantasies that I can force things (situations, bodies, emotions, sensations) to be other than they are. It is a refusal to insist—a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness—that requires individuals to mask, suppress, and disregard discomfort in the process of determining what is possible, of what we are capable. “You cannot always close the gap between how you do feel and how you should feel,” willfulness theorist Sara Ahmed writes. “Behind the sharpness of this ‘cannot’ is a world of possibility.” Ahmed reclaims “killjoy” as a site of productive misalignment with cultural instructions to be (or act) happy in oppressive circumstances. If a cruelly optimistic culture insists that we fake it till we make it, the crip killjoy refuses to play along. Describing the decision not to travel in terms of debility (I cannot) remains, however, much easier on my relationships and professional standing than describing it in terms of capacity (I will not), and, recalling Puar, my commitment to “insistently rendering bare the instability of the divisions between capacity-endowed and debility-laden bodies” (“Prognosis,” 169) works better to bolster decisions internally than to frame them to family members or supervisors. In such lived environments, I become a stealth cripistemologist. Sometimes comfort comes from relaxing into debility instead of frantically scrambling away from it. Harriet McBryde Johnson says as much in her memoir of muscular dystrophy, Too Late to Die Young, opening with her choice at age 15 to stop forcing her body into medically prescribed straightening devices and relaxing instead into a “deep twisty S-curve” (1). “Since my backbone found its own natural shape,” she explains, “I’ve been entirely comfortable in my skin” (2). Cripistemological inversions or, in less binary terms, dysplasias of ableist logic, might pause over the endless deferral of comfort within this system of compulsory able-bodiedness—and here I return to the scoliosis that places me on the twisted spine spectrum with Harriet—to reflect on the futility of this idea of future comfort, as it propels us further into discomfort by working harder to finally get somewhere more comfortable: better posture, a better professional position, or the golden years of rest and leisure, even as we grind joints, contort muscles, and injure discs (this, too, is the “cost of getting better”). The decision to be capable—like the decision to be thin (girl, I could tell you stories)—is a winding road of self-deprivation presented as a cultural good. The decision to be unstable, incapable, unwilling, disabled (the sharpness of this “cannot”) opens up a world of possibility.

## Framing

### Composition

#### The role of the ballot is to vote for the best methodology of composition.

#### Composition is not only an act of writing, but a process that demands particular bodies within the classroom. Pedagogy should style itself towards isolating moments of queerness/disability and proliferating them to resist ideal notions of being. This process of decomposition refuses static finality and instead enables pathways for alternative forms of existence.

Robert McRuer, 2006

“Composing Queerness and Disability: The Corporate University and Alternative Corporealities” In “Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability” New York University Press, pg 157-159.

**In some very important ways, we are in fact not all queer/disabled. The fact that some of us get beaten and left for dead tied to deer fences or that others of us die virtually unnoticed in underfunded and unsanitary group homes should be enough to highlight that the heterosexual/queer and able-bodied/disabled binaries produce real and material distinctions. However**, recognizing that the question “aren’t we all queer/disabled?” can be an attempt at containment and affirming that I resist that containment, **I nonetheless argue that there are moments when we are all queer/disabled, and that those disabled/queer moments are desirable**. In particular, **a crip theory of composition argues for the desirability and extension of those moments when we are all queer/disabled**, since **it is those moments that provide us with a means of speaking back to straight composition in all its guises.** Instead of a banal, humanistic universalization of queerness/disability, **a crip theory of composition advocates for the temporary or contingent universalization of queerness/disability. The flip side of the fact that there are moments when all of us are queer/disabled is the fact that no one (unfortunately) is queer/disabled all of the time—that would be impossible to sustain in a cultural order that privileges heterosexuality/able-bodied identity and that compels all of us, no matter how distant we might be from the ideal, into repetitions that approximate those norms. Critical de-composition**, however, **results from reorienting ourselves away from those compulsory ideals and onto the composing process and the composing bodies—the alternative, and multiple, corporealities—that continually ensure that things can turn out otherwise.** Put differently**, critical de-composition results from actively and collectively desiring not virtual but critical disability and queerness.** Instead of solely and repeatedly asking the questions Cintron rightly cites as central to “school-appropriate” writing instruction— “‘Have you chosen the right word?’ ‘Can this be made clearer?’ ‘Your argument here is inconsistent.’ ‘Are you being contradictory?’” (231)—we might ask questions designed to dismantle our current corpo-reality: How can we queer this? How can we crip it? What ideologies or norms that are at work in this text, discourse, program need to be cripped? How can this system be de-composed? I recognize that the general point I am making here is one that has been central to a certain mode of composition theory for some time. Although I want to complicate the project, I in fact believe that one of the conditions of possibility for my own analysis here is precisely the collective and ongoing project, within composition theory, of arguing for the difficult but necessary work of continually resisting a pedagogy focused on finished products. To take just one example, William A. Covino writes: In even the most enlightened composition class, a class blown by the winds of change through a “paradigm shift” into a student-centered, process-oriented environment replete with heuristics, sentence combining, workshopping, conferencing, and recursive revising, speculation and exploration remain subordinate to finishing. . . . While writing is identified exclusively with a product and purpose that contain and abbreviate it, writers let the conclusion dictate their tasks and necessarily censor whatever imagined possibilities seem irrelevant or inappropriate; they develop a trained incapacity to speculate and raise questions, to try stylistic and formal alternatives. They become unwilling and unable to fully elaborate the process of composing. (316–317) As I asserted at the beginning of this chapter, however, such critiques remain decidedly incorporeal—composition theory has not yet recognized (or perhaps has censored the “imagined possibility”) that the demand for certain kinds of finished projects in the writing classroom is congruent with the demand for certain kinds of bodies. Not recognizing this congruence, in turn, can bring us to a point where the imagined solution is the sort of disembodied postmodernism Covino calls for. I’m suggesting that queer theory and disability studies should figure centrally into the work that we do in composition and composition theory—that, in fact, they already do in some ways figure centrally into that work, since the critical projects that we have been imagining, projects of resisting closure or containment and accessing other possibilities, are queer/crip projects. In other words, a subtext of the decades-long project in composition theory focusing on the composing process and away from the finished product is that disability and queerness are desirable.